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ABSTRACT

A study of 663 children in grades 2 through 6 was conducted to determine how children perceive sex roles related to school and classroom situations. The children, taken from thirty classrooms in six different elementary schools, responded to a questionnaire suitable for non-readers. An experimenter read 18 questions to the children who marked an answer with visual representations of boys or girls. Children were asked whether boys, girls, or both boys and girls were perceived in certain classroom roles. The research inference was that if one sex or the other was perceived by the children to predominate, then sex stereotyping might be attributed to the area of the question. The children's responses indicated that sex stereotyping is very much a part of the elementary school curriculum. Certain activities are being limited, not by a child's ability but by gender, and a differential system of reward and punishment is being applied on the basis of sex. The only area in which children reported little sex stereotyping was in their perception of who was smarter. (Author/EB)

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CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF SEX STEREOTYPING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

While there has been substantial research on the differences in achievement and treatment of elementary school boys and girls, there is very little data on how children perceive sex roles related to the school and classroom situations.

In this study children in grades 2 through 6 responded to a survey questionnaire suitable for non-readers. The sample of 663 children was taken from thirty classrooms in six different elementary schools. An experimenter read 18 questions to the children who marked an answer sheet with visual representations of boys and girls. Children were asked whether boys, girls, or both boys and girls were perceived in certain classroom roles. The research inference was that if one sex or the other was perceived by the children to predominate, then sex stereotyping might be attributed to the area of the question.

The results obtained indicate that children thought there were a number of classroom activities appropriate for males, and others appropriate for females. Children perceived boys as the recipients of negative treatment and girls the recipients of positive treatment from teachers. The only area in which children reported little sex typing was in their perception of who was smarter.

BACKGROUND

A variety of hypotheses have been proposed to explain achievement difference of boys and girls, particularly in reading. Some have argued that not only are the schools more suited to females, but that female teachers are not suited to teaching boys and even discriminate against them. These proponents state that more male teachers would increase the achievement of boys in reading. With respect to treatment by

teachers, a review of many studies indicate that while children may perceive more negative treatment during reading instruction, observational data indicated no significant differences in the way teachers treat boys and girls. (Davis and Slobodian, 1967; Good and Brophy, 1971). Lahaderne (1976) reviewed the findings of eight studies investigating the interaction of male and female teachers with students and stated that male teachers may be even more biased to same sex students than female teachers. In their extensive review of studies involving sex of teacher and students and in their own research, Brophy and Good (1974) concluded that the sex of the teacher was largely irrelevant in explaining sex differences in student achievement.

With respect to criticism and praise in the classroom, several studies have revealed that boys receive significantly more criticism and negative comments from teachers. (Felsenthal, 1970; Jackson and Lahaderne, 1967) There is some indication from a variety of studies that boys receive more praise from teachers as well. (Felsenthal, 1970; Brophy and Good, 1970; Everston, Brophy, and Good, 1972) However it was noted that much of the teacher criticism and praise was directed toward high and low achieving boys--the high achievers receiving praise and criticism, the low achievers receiving criticism. In a review of eight studies which investigated the achievement of males with male teachers, Lahaderne (1976) concluded that none found a significant interaction between teacher sex and achievement of males.

Brophy and Good (1974) cited other areas where sex of the student is a factor in student-teacher interaction. They maintain that teachers overestimate the ability of boys and have lower expectations of their ability. They also state that teachers have more negative attitudes towards boys, particularly related to their behavior in the classroom.

In several studies comparing the intelligence of boys and girls, no sex differences have been found. However in studies of reading performance, girls frequently show significantly higher achievement in reading and verbal skills. (Balow, 1963; Gates, 1961; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974) Yet several studies indicate that upon beginning reading instruction, no difference in readiness was attributable to sex. (Felsenthal, 1970; McNeil, 1964)

In a number of studies of reading achievement, researchers have attributed differences to environmental or cultural influences. (Balow, 1963; Gates, 1961; Dwyer, 1973)

In a study of sex differences and reading achievement in Germany, Preston (1962) found that boys achieved higher in reading. He suggested that this finding might be explained by the presence of more male teachers and that the act of reading is more closely associated with the male role in Germany.

Johnson (1973, 1976) compared the reading achievement of boys and girls in four English speaking countries: United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Nigeria. He found that boys outperformed girls in Great Britain and Nigeria, with girls achieving higher in the United States and Canada. Johnson explained his results by suggesting several explanations including teacher, parent and societal expectations regarding sex appropriate roles which vary from nation to nation. He also mentioned the larger proportion of male teachers in England and Nigeria.

In summarizing the research on sex differences related to achievement, teacher sex, student treatment, and sex roles, the data supporting arguments that female teachers discriminate against boys and that

male teachers have a positive effect on students' achievement appear weak.

The most substantial research to explain student sex differences in achievement appears to lie in the area of sex role expectations which present a conflict, particularly for boys.

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which children perceived sex differences in classroom activities, teacher treatment and intelligence. If indeed there were different expectations regarding sex appropriate roles in the classroom, the present investigation sought to determine the degree to which these expectations were perceived by children.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects consisted of 663 children in grades 2 through 6 from six elementary schools. Of the 30 classes sampled, there were six classes at each grade level. In each school one class per grade level responded to the survey.

The school system was located in an industrial mid-western city of 125,000 people with five colleges and universities in the area. Politically the city consists of a conservative Democratic labor vote. The schools sampled consisted of an inner city lower class Black school; an inner city mixed racial and socioeconomic school; two lower middle class ethnic schools, one suburban, one rural; and two schools in residential suburban neighborhoods, one middle class, the other middle to upper class. Racially 77.4% of the children were white, 21.7% Black, and .9% were either Oriental or Hispanic.

Survey

The survey instrument consisted of eighteen questions which were read to the children by an experimenter. This instrument had been reduced from forty questions in a pilot study to determine which activities were in fact performed by children. Children responded to the questions by marking a box on an answer sheet which visually represented the following responses: "only girls," "mostly girls," "both boys and girls," "mostly boys," or "only boys." In this respect even non-readers were able to respond to the questions.

Table 1

Procedure

Responses from the children were combined into three categories: boys, girls, or both. Chi square tests of significance were performed by question and sex, by question and race, and by question and grade to determine whether there were differences in perceptions between sex and among grades and races.

Questions were also analyzed to determine whether sex role stereotyping existed. Responses were considered non-stereotypic if all of the children responded "both" to a question or if relatively equal percentages of students selected either "boys" or "girls."

Results

Responses to the survey indicated six different clusters of response. These clusters were:

1. activities involving strength or mechanical ability
2. those involving activities related to domestic or academic ability
3. perceptions regarding negative treatment from teachers
4. perceptions regarding positive treatment from teachers

Table 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Which students does the teacher ask to carry books?
2. Which students help serve food in the lunchroom?
3. Which students get paddled more?
4. Which students move desks, chairs and other furniture?
5. Which students behave best in the halls?
6. Which students set up and run the filmstrip and movie projectors for the teachers?
7. Which students are quiet and good?
8. Which students behave best in the lunchroom?
9. Which are the smartest students in your class?
10. Which students behave best on the school bus when you go on class trips?
11. Which students do teachers like best?
12. Which students straighten the bookshelves?
13. Which students behave best on the playground?
14. Which students get more praise from the teacher such as the teacher saying "you do nice work, neat work, good work?" etc.
15. Which students set up chairs for special programs in the gym?
16. Which students help in the school library?
17. Which students tutor other children and help them in their work?
18. Which students does the teacher yell at most?

5. behavior

6. intelligence

An average stereotype score was computed by averaging the responses of all the questions in each cluster by sex, grade and race

Tables 2 & 3

When questions were analyzed by sex, male stereotyping existed on all questions in the strength/mechanical cluster. There were no significant differences in the way boys and girls responded to these questions, though boys were somewhat more likely to see each of these activities as more male sex typed. When the percent of male stereotyping over the four questions in this cluster were averaged into a total stereotype score, boys perceived 49.2% male bias on these questions, girls perceived 43.8%.

Table 4

Female stereotyping existed on all questions in the domestic/academic cluster. There were significant differences in the perceptions of girls and boys on three of the four questions. The average stereotype score on these questions indicated that 49.6% of the girls perceived female stereotyping, as did 36.0% of the boys.

There were significant differences between the perceptions of boys and girls on both questions in the negative teacher treatment cluster. Both sexes reported bias towards males. Females were more likely to see discrimination of males than males. The average stereotype score of girls was 67%, compared with boys, 59%.

Significant sex differences occurred in the perception of males and females on both questions in the positive treatment cluster. Females more strongly perceive themselves receiving positive treatment with an

Table 2

CHI SQUARE LEVELS OF SIGNIFICANCE BY QUESTION

	Race	Grade	Sex
STRENGTH/MECHANICAL ABILITY			
Runs projectors	NS	**	NS
Sets up chairs in gym	NS	**	NS
Moves furniture	*	**	NS
Carries books	NS	**	NS
NEGATIVE TEACHER TREATMENT			
Gets paddled more	NS	**	*
Gets yelled at more	*	**	**
INTELLIGENCE			
Who's Smarter	*	**	**

** .001

* .01

Table 3

CHI SQUARE LEVELS OF SIGNIFICANCE BY QUESTION

DOMESTIC/ACADEMIC JOBS	Race	Grade	Sex
Serves food	**	**	NS
Helps in school library	**	**	**
Straightens bookshelves	*	NS	**
Tutors others	NS	NS	**
BEHAVIOR			
Better hall behavior	NS	NS	**
Better playground behavior	NS	NS	**
Better lunchroom behavior	NS	NS	**
Quiet and good	NS	*	**
Better bus behavior	NS	NS	**
POSITIVE TEACHER TREATMENT			
More praise from teacher	NS	NS	**
Teacher likes best	NS	NS	**

** .001

* .01

Table 4

COMPARISON OF AVERAGE STEREOTYPE SCORES
BY CLUSTER AND SEX

	%Girls	%Boys
STRENGTH/MECHANICAL JOBS		
Response "Boys"	43.8	49.2
DOMESTIC/ACADEMIC JOBS		
Response "Girls"	49.6	36.0
NEGATIVE TEACHER TREATMENT		
Response "Boys"	67.0	59.0
POSITIVE TEACHER TREATMENT		
Response "Girls"	32.0	24.2
BEHAVIOR		
Response "Girls"	55.6	31.3
WHO'S SMARTER		
Same Sex Response	39.5	30.1

average stereotype score of 32.%. Males also saw females as favored in this treatment with an average bias score of 24.2%. Thus with respect to treatment from teachers, girls were more likely to perceive boys receiving negative treatment and girls receiving positive treatment.

There were significant sex differences in the way boys and girls perceived behavior on all of the questions in the behavior cluster, though both sexes perceived good behavior as a female stereotype. The average stereotype score in this cluster for girls was 55.6%, for boys, 31.3%.

The only area where girls and boys disagreed significantly on a sex role stereotype was on the question who was smarter. Girls perceived a female stereotype of greater intelligence 39.5%. Boys selected males 30.1%.

Comparison of Question/Cluster by Grade

When questions were analyzed by grade, male stereotyping was perceived on those questions in the strength/mechanical cluster. There were significant differences between grades on all questions in the cluster. Carrying books was an activity which increased in stereotyping by grade. The average stereotype score by grade increased from second to third grade, declined in the fourth and increased steadily thereafter. The same pattern occurred on questions in the domestic/academic cluster.

Table 5

In the domestic/academic cluster there were significant differences between grades for two of the four questions--serving food and helping in the school library. Children in all grades perceived these activities as female stereotyped.

Table 5

COMPARISON OF TOTAL SCORES

BY CATEGORY AND GRADE

	%2	%3	%4	%5	%6
STRENGTH/DOMESTIC JOBS					
Response "Boys"	40.9	54.8	36.3	44.7	59.2
DOMESTIC ACADEMIC JOBS					
Response "Girls"	43.6	50.6	36.9	39.1	43.9
NEGATIVE TEACHER TREATMENT					
Response "Boys"	50.8	57.2	67.3	61.5	78.7
POSITIVE TEACHER TREATMENT					
Response "Girls"	28.4	27.3	26.8	27.1	30.7
BEHAVIOR					
Response "Girls"	37.0	41.7	44.4	43.9	47.2
WHO'S SMARTER					
Response "Girls"	24.4	22.0	29.1	25.2	33.6
"Boys"	26.0	25.8	18.5	6.9	8.2

There were significant differences between grades on both questions related to negative teacher treatment. Both sexes viewed boys as the recipients of negative treatment, with this view tending to increase with grade. Differences between grades were not significant on questions related to positive teacher treatment. Both girls and boys perceived girls as the recipients of this treatment, with this stereotype relatively consistent across grade level.

There were significant differences between grades on only one question in the behavior cluster--who was quiet and good. Students perceived a female stereotype in good behavior, and with one exception, this increased with grade level.

On the question of who was smarter, there were significant differences between grades. Perceptions regarding boys as smarter declined with grade level, though boys were perceived smarter in grades two and three. Thereafter bias began to favor females.

Comparison of Question/Cluster and Race

On those questions in the strength/mechanical cluster, there were significant differences among the responses of races only on the question of moving furniture. All races perceived the items in this cluster as male stereotyped, with this being greatest among Black children. The average stereotype score for Blacks on this cluster was 51.8%; whites, 45.3%; and children of other races, 37.5%

Table 6

There were significant differences between the responses of races on three of the four questions in the domestic/academic cluster--serving food, helping in the library, and straightening bookshelves. All races agreed on female stereotyping in this cluster. White children perceived the most stereotyping with an average stereotype

Table 6

COMPARISON OF AVERAGE SCORES

BY CATEGORY AND RACE

	%Whites	%Blacks	%Other
STRENGTH/MECHANICAL JOBS			
Response "Boys"	45.3	51.8	37.5
DOMESTIC/ACADEMIC JOBS			
Response "Girls"	44.4	36.1	29.2
NEGATIVE TEACHER TREATMENT			
Response "Boys"	65.5	55.2	41.7
POSITIVE TEACHER TREATMENT			
Response "Girls"	27.2	30.9	16.7
BEHAVIOR			
Response "Girls"	43.5	41.4	23.3
WHO'S SMARTER			
Response "Girls"	25.0	34.7	
Response "Boys"			16.7

score of 44.4%; Blacks, 36.1%, and children of other races, 29.2%.

On only one question in the teacher treatment clusters were there significant differences between races--who gets yelled at more. Male stereotyping was reported by all races in negative teacher treatment, and female stereotyping on positive teacher treatment. Whites perceived the most negative treatment of boys, 65.5%; and Black children perceived the most positive treatment of girls, 30.9%.

There were no significant differences among the races on any of the items in the behavior cluster. All races reported female stereotyping in this cluster with average stereotype scores highest for whites, 43.5%; followed by Blacks, 41.4%; and children of other races, 23.3%.

There were significant differences among the races on the question of who was smarter. Black and white children perceived girls as smarter, Blacks, 34.7%; whites, 25.%. Children of other races responded either "both" or "boys" to this question with 16.7% perceiving boys smarter.

Total Scores by Question and Stereotyped Roles

When the responses of all the children were analyzed by question, male stereotyping was perceived on all activities in the strength/mechanical cluster, and in the receipt of negative treatment from teachers. Female stereotyping was perceived on all questions in the domestic/academic cluster, behavior cluster and in the receipt of positive treatment from teachers though this cluster was the least stereotyped with the exception of the question on intelligence.

Tables 7 and 8

On the question of who was smarter both sexes tended towards a same sex response, especially girls. This was the only question on which the direction of stereotyping differed by sex of student. It

Table 7

TOTAL RESPONSES BY QUESTION

MALE SEX ROLES

STRENGTH/MECHANICAL JOBS	%GIRLS	%BOTH	%BOYS
Runs projectors	3.6	42.8	53.5
Sets up chairs in gym	2.9	44.9	52.2
Moves furniture	3.5	54.4	42.1
Carries books	2.1	59.1	38.8
NEGATIVE TEACHER TREATMENT			
Gets paddled more	3.6	31.8	64.6
Gets yelled at more	8.4	30.0	61.5
WHO'S SMARTER			
Girls' responses	39.5	57.6	2.9
Boys' responses	15.5	54.4	30.1

Table 8

TOTAL RESPONSES BY QUESTION

FEMALE SEX ROLES

DOMESTIC/ACADEMIC JOBS	%GIRLS	%BOTH	%BOYS
Serves food	57.9	40.4	1.7
Helps in school library	50.7	42.7	6.6
Straightens bookshelves	33.0	54.3	12.7
Tutors others	28.1	61.7	10.3
BEHAVIOR			
Better hall behavior	51.7	36.3	11.9
Better playground behavior	46.9	45.9	7.2
Better lunchroom behavior	43.9	46.6	9.5
Quiet and good	38.3	54.0	7.7
Better bus behavior	33.3	56.1	10.6
POSITIVE TEACHER TREATMENT			
More praise from teacher	30.0	60.9	9.0
Teacher likes best	25.9	64.7	9.4

appears that being smart and doing well in school is perceived at least by elementary school girls as consistent with their perception of their role. Though males perceived males smarter than females, boys perceived less stereotyping in this area.

DISTINCTIVE CLASSROOMS

There were fifteen classrooms which were notable either because of very high or very low bias scores by cluster. Of these classrooms seven were ones in which boys were viewed by the students as being smarter. This did not appear to be related to sex of teacher or grade. The common factor between these classes was that praise was more evenly reported by students to be given to both boys and girls, or given more to boys. This appeared to be somewhat related to the children's perceptions of male behavior since in these classrooms children reported less difference in the behavior of boys and girls although girls were still more likely to be reported as having better behavior. Another possible interpretation is that when boys received more positive reinforcement, their behavior improved. This improved behavior could have had a positive effect on self-concept to such an extent that the children also perceived boys as smarter.

In the other eight classrooms girls were viewed as smarter. In these classrooms, the proportion of male teachers was twice that of the proportion of male teachers in the whole study, and also the grade levels were higher, possible due to the larger proportion of males teaching upper grades. In these classrooms there was much more negative treatment of boys, positive treatment of girls, and much better behavior perceived of girls.

What these results indicate is that individual teachers can affect the perceptions children have of themselves, particularly in relation

to their intelligence, perhaps because of the different types of reinforcement used in the classrooms. If the children are to be any judge of reinforcement, male teachers are more likely to use positive reinforcement with girls, negative reinforcement with boys. Positive reinforcement appears to have a very strong effect among boys in raising self-perceptions of intelligence.

The effect among girls is much more nebulous. When girls are seen as receiving more positive treatment than boys, particularly more praise, girls are perceived as smarter. However when boys receive as much or more praise than girls, boys are viewed as smarter. In other words when students are treated equally, girls tend to be viewed as having less intelligence. Is this because they are valued less by society?

Limitations of the Study

There were a number of variables which were not controlled in the study. No attempt was made to determine the achievement of the children in order to compare their perceptions of intelligence with the actual performance in the classroom or with intelligence test scores. Teachers were identified only by sex though they varied in age, race, years of teaching experience, and teaching styles.

In administering the survey instrument there appeared to be school and teacher differences in attitudes toward the questionnaire. These ranged from friendly cooperation to outright hostility and paranoia. regarding how the results would be utilized or interpreted. Variables among schools, teachers and classes with respect to school climate and teaching styles were not controlled and would be an important consideration in further research. In determining whether stereotyping of children exists, one must be careful not to stereotype teachers. Yet

if one were to categorize teachers according to whether they treated children in an egalitarian or sex typed manner, few teachers in this study would have fit easily into either category according to the responses of the children. Teaching style in this sense appeared to be unconscious and unconsistent.

The major difficulty in a study of this kind is measuring perceptions against reality. At the time this survey was administered to the 663 children, an independent survey of teacher perceptions was being conducted by Hoover (1977) in the same school corporation. This survey was administered to all 1,390 elementary and secondary teachers in the system of whom 60% replied. Teacher responses were anonymous. To the question whether classroom activities were assigned on the basis of sex, of the 807 teachers who responded to this question, 85.5% of them replied "no." Of the 848 who responded to the question whether teachers used different methods of rewards and punishment for boys and girls, 65% replied "no." When compared to student perceptions, the disparity between the two becomes evident. Observational data may explain whether it is the students or teachers who have misperceived reality. Yet this reality is legitimate for those who see it. We have yet to measure the body language, facial expressions and subtleties of expectations either from teachers or society at large.

Further research might measure comparisons between teacher and student perceptions combined with achievement, intelligence and observational data as well as in depth interviews with both students and teachers.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicated that to some extent sex role stereotyping existed on all activities in the classroom. Children

of each sex perceived more stereotyping of activities related to her/his own sex, with this tendency being stronger among girls. Male activities were somewhat more stereotyped overall than female activities. Black children perceived stronger sex typing among male jobs and less stereotyping of female jobs than whites. There was a tendency for stereotyping in some of these activities to increase with grade.

The strongest perception held by children was that boys get more negative treatment from teachers, consistent with observational data in previous research. In this study girls were apt to see more negative treatment than boys, and Blacks saw somewhat less than whites. The degree of bias perceived against boys increased with grade level.

There was not as strong a perception of stereotyping girls in positive treatment from teachers. Girls were much more likely to see themselves as the recipients of this behavior.

On questions related to behavior, more girls than boys believed that girls were better behaved, and stereotyping in behavior tended to increase with grade.

The least amount of sex bias was perceived on the question of who was smarter. On this question each sex tended to pick his/her own sex. Blacks viewed females as smarter than males more often than whites, and girls picked girls more often than boys picked boys. In second and third grades slightly more boys were viewed as smarter, and thereafter girls were viewed as smarter with the greatest difference perceived by sixth graders.

Based on this data, it does not appear that women teachers discriminate against boys. To the contrary, male teachers may be more biased towards boys. Viewed another way, girls think they are better liked by teachers, particularly males.

There were indications that there was sex role stereotyping in several activities related to reading. Girls were perceived helping in the library and straightening bookshelves. The male role consisted of carrying books for the teacher.

The perceptions of the children appear to support previous research on criticism of boys, but not praise of boys. This may be somewhat confounded by behavior in the classroom.

In summary girls perceived more stereotyping than boys in every area except the male stereotyped jobs. It is no doubt part of the feminine stereotype to be more sensitive to the expectations and wants of others. In school the significant other is the teacher, and teachers want well behaved students. Perhaps what the girls believe is that if they conform to the standards of behavior, they will be better liked, and having figured this out may mean they are smarter.

What the data suggest is that sex role stereotyping is very much a part of the elementary school curriculum. Certain activities are being limited, not by a child's ability, but by gender. A differential system of reward and punishment is being applied on the basis of sex. Teachers may unconsciously be limiting the learning experiences of children by restricting the range of activities in which they may participate. Children may be learning inappropriate or outdated roles which will have little relevance to the society of their adulthood. By continuing to teach traditional sex roles we may be educating children for a society which exists for shrinking numbers of people. These more covert forms of sex discrimination may be even more difficult to eliminate because of their unconscious nature.

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